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## **Visitor Educator Programme at the Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art Sri Lanka**

“How important is the visitor experience to a museum of modern and contemporary art? Does it begin when someone steps foot inside its physical space, or over social media? What motivates people to visit a museum? Do all visitors experience a museum in the same way? These are some of the questions we ask ourselves as we look at how to create the best possible museum experience for our visitors,” says Chief Curator, Sharmini Pereira.

To achieve its vision of establishing a more publicly accessible museum in Sri Lanka, the Museum and Modern and Contemporary Art Sri Lanka (MMCA Sri Lanka) needs to build capacity of museum sector personnel, preparing them to not only meet professional standards set by the museum industry internationally but also equipping them with the knowledge required for meeting challenges that are relevant, above all, to the Sri Lankan context. One of the key areas of capacity building for the museum is thinking about ways to facilitate meaningful arts-based learning and engagement experiences for a variety of visitors.

In early 2022, the museum launched the second phase of its Visitor Educator (VE) programme. Conceived and designed on docent programmes that are hallmarks of professional museum operations and pedagogical approaches worldwide, the VE position and training programme is the first of its kind in Sri Lanka. It is at the heart of MMCA Sri Lanka’s learning and training efforts, not only for its internal staff, but also for its public.

In 2022, the role of Curator Learning and Training was created, underlining the commitment of the museum to educational work over exhibition making. As the

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first curator to take on this role, Sanuja Goonetilleke, has been involved in setting up and designing the VE programme. Speaking about her work, Sanuja says “VE training covers multiple disciplines including research, collections safety, customer service, pedagogical methods for working with adult and child learners, data collection, making sense of visual art terminology, event management, and public speaking. VEs can transfer the skills they gain through their experience at the MMCA Sri Lanka to a variety of careers within, but also beyond, the world of professional museums in Sri Lanka and internationally. This is what makes it such an attractive role.”

The MMCA Sri Lanka’s VEs play a pivotal role as the first points of contact between visitors and the museum. Learning through art, particularly in the context of a museum, is a relatively new approach to learning in Sri Lanka. Often, school visits to museums are passive, non-interactive experiences with little to no contact with staff who work in the museum. By contrast, the MMCA Sri Lanka takes an entirely different approach by focussing on the quality of the visitor experience from the time they might engage with the museum online to their experience in the galleries and as they leave. MMCA Sri Lanka’s Gallery Manager Thariq Thahireen says “Visiting the museum in person, audiences encounter VEs, who are trained to greet them at the front desk and interact with them inside the galleries. They can be identified by their ‘Visitor Educator,’ ‘Ask Me,’ and ‘Free Tour Guide’ badges they wear in Sinhala, Tamil, and English. Although approaching a VE might not be every visitor's preferred way of experiencing an exhibition, the VEs are present in the galleries to engage with those who have questions, or want to talk about artworks on display and do a tour of a gallery or the entire exhibition”.

VEs enable visitors to learn about and engage with the artworks on view, provide context, and introduce close-looking techniques through conversations, tours, and educational activities for children. VEs also support the care of the exhibits in the exhibition, observe health and safety protocols, and assist with the setup of its weekly public programmes. All VEs work part-time on a shift basis, with many of them fitting in their work alongside full-time jobs or studies in the education or arts and design sectors. Since the launch of the programme in December 2019, the museum has worked with over 40 VEs.

“Funding makes so much of what we do possible. While exhibitions are a central aspect of what we do, we rely on the dedication and commitment of our VEs to

help break down the barriers for many audiences, who walk into our galleries and may not know how or where to begin taking in what they are looking at.” says Pereira. The VE programme is supported by the Foundation for Arts Initiatives (FfAI) and the Nations Trust Bank. Speaking about their support of the MMCA Sri Lanka, Sanjaya Senarath, Chief Marketing Officer at Nations Trust Bank PLC, echoes the importance of empowering the next generation of change-makers “As a strong supporter in promoting local art and artists, Nations Trust Bank looks forward to backing the initiatives taken by the MMCA Sri Lanka to expose Sri Lankan contemporary art to the new generation whilst uplifting local artists to the next level.”

Speaking about the preparation that goes into creating the VE programme, Goonetilleke, Curator Learning and Training at the MMCA Sri Lanka, says “Our Visitor Educators are a truly diverse group of young professionals. Some are educators in schools. Some maintain artistic practices in visual, literary, or performing arts. Some work/study in STEM fields but have a strong affinity for the arts and education. For all of them, however, this is the first time they are working in a museum context, and without realising it, helping to build the country’s first museum of modern and contemporary art through their important work.”

*Those interested in working at the MMCA Sri Lanka in this role may email their CV to [jobs@mmca-srilanka.org](mailto:jobs@mmca-srilanka.org).*